



**Consortium for Research on  
Educational Access,  
Transitions and Equity**

**Free Primary Education and After in Kenya:  
Enrolment impact, quality effects,  
and the transition to secondary school**

**Moses Oketch  
Anthony Somerset**

**CREATE PATHWAYS TO ACCESS  
Research Monograph No. 37**

**May 2010**



**University of Sussex  
Centre for International Education**



**Institute of Education,  
University of London**



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## **List of Acronyms**

CPE	Certificate of Primary Education
CREATE	Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transition and Equity
FPE	Free Primary Education
FSE	Free Secondary Education
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KCPE	Kenya Certificate of Primary Education
KCSE	Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education

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## Preface

This report of field research, undertaken by Moses Oketch (London) and Tony Somerset (Sussex), adds greatly to our understanding of the impact of national policies of free education on individual primary schools, on flows of students through those schools and their transitions to secondary schools. Few studies of attempts to universalize access to primary evaluate impact over time. Even fewer show any concern for the forward consequences on access to secondary school that develop as expanded cohorts move through the primary grades.

The authors have worked in 17 schools in four contrasted districts of Kenya and have detailed a story that is neither simple nor the same for each school. They provide a reminder that simple aspirations – giving all children access to free primary schooling – can lead to complex realities. Some schools limited their intake of new students to historic levels and did not expand significantly. In strong contrast, other schools accepted large numbers of new entrants without complementary increases in the number of teachers, teaching resources, and space. The impact of rapid and uneven growth on reduced quality is clear, if unintended.

Transition rates into secondary schools appear to have increased after the announcement of fee free schooling at this level in 2008. However, polarization remains very strong with access to the best secondary schools restricted to a small sub-set of primary schools. Moreover, chances of continuing beyond secondary to University are strongly stratified with those attending Provincial secondary schools having less than a fifth of the chance of those in National schools and those in District schools less than one hundredth the chance.

The messages are clear. Though access to primary schooling may have improved, for many it is likely that the quality of what they have access to has deteriorated. And at higher levels improved access seems to have been accompanied by no reductions in the unequal chances of proceeding to higher levels. These findings are important and a reminder that CREATE's expanded vision of access, which includes reduced variations in quality, fairer transition to secondary, and greater equity in progression to higher levels, needs highlighting in policy dialogue.

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## Summary

Following on earlier work in which the national-level impact of the 2003 Free Primary Education programme and its two predecessors was explored, this study uses local-level information gathered during field visits to a small group of case-study primary schools to complement and extend the previous analysis.

First, we examine the local-level effects of FPE 2003. These varied widely from school to school. At two high-impact schools, acute shortages of teachers, physical facilities and learning materials brought about by massive enrolment increases had led to severe ‘quality shock’, from which neither school had recovered at the time of our initial visit in 2007. Both schools are located in Nairobi, and both draw their pupils almost entirely from low-income families. By contrast two low-impact schools had employed barriers which protected them from the effects of FPE; one through the levying of charges for additional facilities; the other by requiring Grade 1 recruits to have completed a pre-primary course at the school’s own, fee-charging, facility. So pupils at these ‘high-barrier’ schools, one in Nairobi the other in Nyeri District, come almost entirely from relatively-prosperous families.

Second, we enquire into the secondary-school transition patterns among the pupils who graduated from our case-study schools at the end of 2007. Partly as a consequence of the introduction of the Free Secondary Education programme at the beginning of 2008, the overall transition rate was high and relatively uniform. But when the data were disaggregated to take account of the type of secondary school entered, substantial differences emerged. Because of their relatively weak performance in the selection examination, the majority of graduates from the rural primary schools, and from urban schools serving low-income families, moved into low-status district secondary schools. By contrast, those from urban schools serving middle-income catchments were more likely to enter a higher-status provincial secondary school. Access to the top-status national secondary schools was largely pre-empted by graduates from the three private primary schools we had included in our case-study group.

We then examine the future consequences likely to follow from the type of secondary school the primary graduate enters. Data from the secondary-school leaving examination results for Central Province indicate that a typical graduate from a national school has a better-than-even chance of qualifying for a regular place at a public university; compared with a chance of about one-in-twelve for a typical provincial-school graduate. The district-school graduate, by contrast, is a rank outsider: his or her chances are typically no better than about one in 200. So the majority of the graduates from the rural primary schools, and urban schools serving low income communities, have virtually no chance of qualifying for university after completing their secondary education – unless by fortunate circumstance their families have the resources to meet the high fees demanded by the parallel university programme.

In the final section we consider implications of the study for policy. It is suggested that at the high-impact primary schools, remedial measures be introduced to counter the effects of the ‘quality shock’ they experienced following FPE in 2003. It is also suggested that consideration be given to the introduction of a secondary-school quota system, either by setting a maximum limit to the proportion of private-school graduates accepted to each national and provincial school; or alternatively by setting a minimum limit to the proportion of leavers accepted from each public primary school to the higher-status secondary schools. However the fundamental issue is that of quality; and no quota system will help resolve it. Without sustained measures to strengthen teaching and learning in the classroom, it is likely that the performance gap between the public and private primary schools will continue to widen.



# **Free Primary Education and After in Kenya: Enrolment impact, quality effects, and the transition to secondary school**

## **1. Introduction**

In January 2003, less than a month after assuming office, the new Kenyan government led by President Kibaki acted to fulfil one of its major election pledges by launching a Free Primary Education (FPE) programme. The initiative had a straightforward, but ambitious, purpose: to make primary schooling accessible to all young Kenyans of appropriate age, wherever they lived and whatever their family circumstances. A cost-sharing scheme, introduced during the late 1980s as part of an IMF-promoted structural adjustment programme, was abandoned; henceforth, the public schools were required to provide primary education entirely free of all user charges.

The 2003 programme (FPE 2003) was not the first initiative directed at the achievement of free, universal primary education in Kenya. There had been two predecessors: the first in 1974, launched by President Kenyatta (FPE 1974); the second in 1979, launched by President Moi shortly after he assumed office following Kenyatta's death (FPE 1979). Response to both initiatives was immediate and massive: in 1974, the Grade 1 intake shot up by more than 150 percent; in 1979, it increased by more than 60 percent. Very quickly, however, these impressive initial gains were heavily eroded, largely as a consequence of their negative effects on quality. Dropout from both the 1974 and 1979 intakes, and likewise from their successors, was huge. By the time the 1974 intake reached Grade 5 it had lost 55 percent of its original members; while over the same span, losses from the 1979 intake amounted to 45 percent. Both programmes brought about substantial enrolment increases in the Grade 1 intakes, but by the time the cohorts reached the higher grades their impact had virtually disappeared. (Oketch and Rolleston, 2007; Somerset, 2007 and 2009). Neither programme came near to achieving universal participation over the full primary cycle. In its election manifesto during the run-up to Independence in 1963, the incoming government had promised free education for a minimum of seven years (Sifuna, 2007). But universal access remained, in Mukudi's (2004) phrase, a 'persisting illusion'.

## 2. The Study

In previous work, briefly referred to in the introductory section above, we had enquired into the national-level impact of the 2003 FPE initiative and its two predecessors on access to primary education, using official enrolment statistics as our main source of data. In this new study we probed more deeply, aiming to explore two sets of access-related issues at the local level through fieldwork in a small, purposively-selected group of case-study schools:

- What effects did FPE 2003 have in the case-study schools? To what extent did these effects vary from school to school, and for what reasons? In the schools where there was a major impact, were the enrolment increases maintained in subsequent years? What were the effects of ‘enrolment shock’ on the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom?
- What were the secondary-school access patterns among the final-year pupils in the case-study schools? How much variation was there in the overall proportion of leavers from each school gaining a secondary school place? Was there further variation in the status of the secondary schools (national, provincial, district) they entered? If so, for what reasons; and what are the likely consequences of this variation for the primary leavers’ longer-term prospects of qualifying for university access?

Expressed in terms of the CREATE access framework (Lewin 2007), the first set of issues concerns Zones 1, 2 and 3 of educational exclusion: children who never enrol at school (*Zone 1*); those who enrol, but drop out before completing the full primary cycle (*Zone 2*); and those who remain at primary school but are disadvantaged in various ways: the low-achievers, low-attenders and repeaters (*Zone 3*).<sup>1</sup> The second set of issues include *Zone 4* exclusion: pupils who complete the primary cycle but fail to make the transition to secondary school, because of academic, economic, or social reasons.

A modest, small-scale survey of a group of 17 schools located in four contrasting districts in Kenya is our main data source. The survey was conducted in two phases; the first in 2007, when we gathered school enrolment data together with pupil-level data for selected samples; and the second in 2008, when we gathered follow-up data for the pupils selected the previous year.

The four districts visited were selected purposively, to provide as wide a range of variation as we could achieve with the limited resources available to us. **Nyeri** is a rural district with high agricultural potential, situated relatively close to Nairobi, and with a long-established, well-developed primary education system. **Kisii** is also a rural district of high agricultural potential, but situated far from any major urban area, and with, relative to Nyeri, a less-developed primary education system. **Kajiado** is a mainly pastoral district of low agricultural potential, and again with a relatively less-developed primary education system. Finally we included **Nairobi**, capital city of Kenya and by far the largest urban area in the country, with an extensive, well-developed primary education system.

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<sup>1</sup> In Lewin’s (2007) phrase, the ‘silently excluded’.

For practical reasons, fieldwork and subsequent analysis for both phases of the survey was divided between the two principal research workers; one of us (MO) taking responsibility for Kisii and Kajiado districts, the other (AS) for Nyeri and Nairobi City.

Within each district, we again sought to maximise variation in our selection of schools. In Kisii, Nyeri and Kajiado we aimed to visit two rural schools, one relatively accessible, the other isolated; one urban school; and finally a private school, run either by a religious denomination or a proprietor. For various reasons, however, we did not adhere strictly to this framework. In Kisii, an ex-medium cost school<sup>2</sup> was substituted for a private school; while in Nyeri an additional urban public school, located in a rapidly developing commercial town, was included.

In Nairobi City our framework was necessarily different. We visited two schools drawing most of their pupils from low-income families, one of them situated on the boundary of a massive slum settlement, the other in a more prosperous area; an ex-high cost school; and finally a private, proprietor-owned school in a new, rapidly-developing middle-income area on the outskirts of the city.

As already noted, the survey was carried out in two phases; the first in 2007, the second in 2008. In the **first phase**, our main purpose was to explore at grassroots level the impact of FPE 2003 in the four years which had elapsed since its inception.

During visits to each of the 17 schools, we gathered information of three kinds:

- **School-level enrolment data**, by year, grade, and gender, for as many years back as the school had viable records. For schools where the data were sufficiently robust, cohort survival curves were constructed, to provide a graphic indicator of the impact of FPE 2003.
- **Pupil-level background data**, using a structured questionnaire with randomly-selected samples of pupils in Grades 5 and 8. Most Grade 5 pupils had started their formal education in 2003, the FPE year; while the Grade 8 pupils were due to sit the KCPE, the vital examination governing access to secondary school, at the end of 2007. The information gathered included schooling history (repetition, school transfers etc), family size, and parents' socioeconomic status (occupation, education). However we found that in many schools, Grade 5 pupils had difficulties completing the questionnaire, even with individual guidance. Hence our analysis focused mainly on the patterns among the Grade 8 pupils.
- **Pupil-level life-history data**. In two of the four districts, the sampled pupils were asked to write life histories. We provided semi-structured guidelines, stressing, however, that everyone was free to answer as they chose. The responses varied widely, but many pupils included an account of their experiences of FPE. In so doing

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<sup>2</sup> Between 1962 and 2002, Kenya public primary schools were divided into three cost schedules: a small group of high-cost or Schedule C schools; a larger group of medium-cost or Schedule B schools; and the majority group of low-cost or Schedule A schools. This categorisation was a survival from the colonial period, when schools were racially segregated. Shortly before Independence, schools were reclassified: those previously reserved for Africans became low-cost schools; those reserved for Asians, medium-cost schools; and those for Europeans, high-cost schools. Examples of schools of each type are discussed in the following section.

they provided us with numerous insights which it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to gain from any other approach.

In the **second phase** of the study, we re-visited each of the 17 case-study schools in mid-2008, approximately one year after our initial visit, and sought follow-up information for each of the pupils in our Grade 5 and Grade 8 samples.

Data for the Grade 5 pupils were, in general, readily available. We met most of them face-to-face: either in a Grade 6 classroom or, if they were repeating, still in Grade 5. Except in some urban schools, former classmates could usually tell us about the minority who had transferred to another school, or dropped out altogether.

For the Grade 8 pupils, however, information-gathering was less straightforward. Repeating the KCPE examination is now rare, so few of those we had met the previous year were still enrolled. A number of schools had kept records of the previous year's graduates, mainly from information provided when they returned to collect their leaving certificates. Some of these records were meticulous; others were so fragmentary as to be almost valueless.

In some schools we found teachers who had maintained a personal interest in former pupils, and knew about their subsequent histories. On occasion, younger brothers or sisters of the leaver were helpful.

However, consultation with the current (2008) Grade 8 class was generally the most useful source of information. We read out the names of the 2007 leavers to the Grade 8 pupils one by one, and asked them to tell us anything they knew about what each leaver was now doing. In schools with multiple streams, we visited every class and cross-checked the information.

In the public schools in the three predominantly rural districts – Kajiado, Kisii and Nyeri - this approach proved highly effective. Even in the town schools, most pupils come from relatively small communities, in which face-to-face contacts are frequent. We could trace virtually every leaver from all 12 schools; and with only a few exceptions, information from different sources enabled us to cross-check.

In Nairobi, however, we encountered problems. In a major, rapidly expanding metropolis, community ties are generally much weaker than they are in rural areas, and personal lives often more anonymous. Furthermore, Nairobi schools do not always draw their pupils from the immediate locality. Many pupils in two of our three Nairobi public schools travel substantial distances each day – and they come from different directions.

Aside from these structural factors, events which could not have been anticipated at the time we were planning the study also affected the quality of the data. Six months after our original fieldwork, the elections of December 2007 led to violent disturbances, in Nairobi and the Rift Valley in particular. Many pupils from our Nairobi schools, especially those living in informal slum settlements, left the city and sought refuge in rural areas where they had family ties. Most of these pupils returned when the violence subsided, but a substantial minority remained behind. Reliable information about these leavers was usually difficult to come by.

In total, we succeeded in tracing 91 of the 107 Grade 8 leavers from the three Nairobi public schools (85 percent). But the reliability of the information was uneven. With about two-thirds

of the leavers, we could corroborate information by cross-checking different sources, but with the remaining one-third, we were forced to rely on what we could learn from a single source.

However, our greatest difficulties in collecting follow-up information were experienced at two of the three private schools: a denominational school in Nyeri District, and a proprietor-owned school on the outskirts of Nairobi City. At the Nyeri school we could trace most of those we had met in Grade 5 during our first visit, but less than two-thirds of those who had been in Grade 8. It seems that because most upper-grade pupils at this school are boarders and come from widely-scattered homes, they tend to lose contact with former schoolmates once they leave.

At the proprietor-owned school near Nairobi, follow-up information was regarded as commercially sensitive and thus confidential. We were given some broad estimates, but could gather no relevant pupil-level data.

We therefore took the decision to visit two additional private schools, both proprietor-owned, where we had personal contacts. One is near Nyeri town, the other on the outskirts of Nairobi. Our visits proved most fruitful. At both schools, records of all Grade 8 leavers dating back to the school's inception had been maintained, and we were given unrestricted access. However the information recorded was limited to the leaver's name, gender and KCPE score, and the name of the secondary school he or she had entered. Other data, including age and socioeconomic status, were not available. Because of time constraints, we did not attempt to gather data for the 2007 Grade 5 cohorts at these two schools.

### **3. FPE 2003: Access and quality effects**

This brief report presents a summary of the two principal sets of findings from our survey. We start, in this section, by focusing on the first set of issues raised at the beginning of Section 2: the impact of FPE 2003 in the case study schools; the variations in that impact from school to school, and the effects of ‘enrolment shock’ on the quality of teaching and learning. Our analysis is based mainly on results from the first phase of the survey, carried out in 2007.

Then in Section 4 we turn our attention to the second set of issues: overall secondary-school transition patterns among the leavers from our case-study primary schools; variation in the proportion of leavers from each school gaining a secondary-school place; and the likely impact of the type of secondary school (national, provincial, district) the leavers entered on their prospects of ultimately qualifying for a university place. The analysis draws largely on the follow-up data we collected during our second visit to the case-study schools in 2008. Finally in Section 5 we summarise the main findings of the study, and consider their implications for policy<sup>3</sup>.

#### **3.1 FPE 2003: Its uneven impact on enrolments**

Like its two predecessors, the Free Primary Education initiative of 2003 had a substantial effect on enrolments at the national level. The total intake to Grade 1 rose from 0.969 million in 2002 to 1.312 million in 2003, an increase of 35 percent. While less sizeable than the increases brought about by FPE 1 in 1974 (150%) and FPE 2 in 1979 (60%), this was nevertheless an impressive achievement.<sup>4</sup> Over the full eight-year primary cycle the response was of course more muted, total enrolments rising from 6.13m in 2002 to 7.16m in 2003 (17%).

However when the national data are disaggregated to the district and school levels, major differences in the response to FPE become apparent. Table 1, on the next page, sets out the patterns at the 14 public schools we visited.

#### **Nairobi City.**

By far the most striking effects, it will be seen, were experienced at two schools in Nairobi City: Tangazo and Majani. At Tangazo, the impact of FPE 2003 was massive: the Grade 1 intake leapt from 95 to no less than 345 – an increase of around 250%. Tangazo is located at the boundary between a high-density but formal housing estate and Kibera, one of the largest slum settlements in sub-Saharan Africa. In our Grade 8 Tangazo sample, more than 90% of the pupils came from Kibera. Tangazo is, overwhelmingly, a school for the poor.

At the smaller Majani School the effects were also substantial, if less dramatic: the intake more than doubled, from 43 to 97. In contrast to Tangazo, Majani is situated near the centre of one of the most affluent suburbs in Nairobi. Nevertheless, the school, like Tangazo, draws its pupils almost entirely from low-income families.

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<sup>3</sup> More detailed reports, based on the first phase of the survey, have been prepared for Kajiado and Kisii Districts (Oketch, 2008), and Nairobi City and Nyeri District (Somerset, 2008), and are available as CREATE Fieldwork Reports.

<sup>4</sup> In terms of absolute numbers, the three FPE initiatives brought about Grade 1 intake increases of 570,000 (FPE1); 375,000 (FPE2) and 343,000 (FPE3).



The reason for this apparent paradox is to be found in the school's history. Majani was first established during the colonial period, when education in Kenya was racially segregated. The school catered solely for pupils of African origin: essentially, the sons and daughters of the cooks, nursemaids, gardeners and other domestic workers who serviced the wants of the European families who, at the time, had exclusive residency rights in the area. Other schools in the same locality, separately administered and teaching to a different curriculum, catered for the European children<sup>5</sup>.

**Table 1: Response to FPE 2003 in 14 public schools: Changes in Grade 1 Enrolments, 2002 to 2003**

District and school	Grade 1 enrolment			School Location	Most-frequent income source of family breadwinners
	2002	2003	Change		
<b>Nairobi:</b>					
Tangazo	95	345	c. 250%	Margin of major slum settlement	Informal urban employment
Majani	43	97	c.125%	Inner city suburb	Domestic service/ informal urban employment
Kisasa	173	164	-6%	Outer city suburb	Professional/white collar employment
<b>Kajiado:</b>					
Mukia	124	166	+34%	Remote rural	Subsistence farming; manual employment
Pembe	53	68	+28%	Rural; part boarding	Pastoralism
Macho	159	178	+12%	Town	Informal urban employment
<b>Kisii:</b>					
Ndovu	65	98	+48%	District town	White-collar employment/ shop keeping
Simba	68	91	+34%	Remote rural	Subsistence farming
Sungura	99	124	+25%	Rural	Subsistence farming
Nyati	158	139	-12%	Town outskirts	Informal urban employment
<b>Nyeri:</b>					
Mugunda	55	63	+15%	Remote rural	Cash farming (tea; dairy cattle)
Baraza	81	90	+14%	Rural	Subsistence farming
Kazi	160	163	+2%	Town	White collar employment
Nafasi	171	171	0%	District town	Manual/ white collar employment

Segregation was abolished during the run-up to independence in 1963, but Majani's original stigma as a school for the underprivileged has proved highly resilient. Despite its extensive, leafy campus, its well-maintained buildings and its desirable location, nearly four-fifths of the 2007 Grade 8 class came from families where the principal breadwinner was a manual worker. As in colonial times, the majority of breadwinners are still domestic servants – although these days they are perhaps more likely to work for an African or Asian employer than for a European one. Other pupils walk, or travel by public transport, from Kangemi – another of the numerous slum settlements which nowadays form a near-continuous band around the peripheries of Nairobi City.

<sup>5</sup> In an adjoining suburb there were schools of yet a third type, catering exclusively for children of Asian origin.

The contrast between the FPE patterns at Tangazo and Majani, and that at Kisasa, our third Nairobi public school, could scarcely be more striking. Tangazo and Majani were both high-impact schools, whereas Kisasa was zero-impact. Grade 1 admissions at Kisasa actually fell in the FPE year – from 173 in 2002 to 164 in 2003.

Kisasa school shares some common features with Majani. Both schools are situated in elite, high-income Nairobi suburbs; and both are long-established, dating back to well before Kenya's independence. But in their historical roots the schools differ radically. During the colonial period Majani, as we have already seen, was a school for African pupils only; whereas Kisasa was restricted to the sons and daughters of the privileged European elite. Along with all other public schools, Kisasa became multi-racial at independence, but the socioeconomic barrier, which had always underpinned the racial barrier, stayed in place. Kisasa became a high-cost school – one of eight in Nairobi City - levying fees more than double those charged at Majani and the other regular, low-cost schools. Pupils from the small but developing African middle class thus gained access, but the less-privileged continued to be barred. Nearly five decades later this historical separation still casts its long shadow, so that to this day Kisasa and other ex-European schools continue to recruit a quite different clientele to ex-African schools such as Majani.

With the inception of the Free Primary Education initiative in 2003, formal fees were proscribed in all public schools – high-cost as well as low-cost. In principle, any pupil was entitled to enrol at any school, irrespective of his or her family circumstances. But in practice, the ex-high cost schools generally found ways to maintain the barriers, often through levies of various kinds for additional facilities or activities - swimming pools, school buses, computers, libraries, school visits.

Large numbers of parents from a nearby slum settlement sought places at Kisasa School during the FPE year, but as the intake figures indicate, few if any succeeded in surmounting the barriers. Many found an ex-low cost school in the same locality to be more receptive.

### **Kajiado district**

As Table 1 shows, there was only a modest response to FPE in the three public schools visited in Kajiado district. Intakes to Grade 1 rose by between 34% at Mukia and 12% at Macho – compared with the national average of 35%.

Kajiado is predominantly a sparsely-populated, semi-arid district, with pastoralism as the main source of livelihood. However Kajiado's northern boundary abuts the rapidly-expanding residential belt surrounding Nairobi City, so this locality houses growing numbers of commuters, of mixed socioeconomic status. A number of proprietor-owned private schools cater for middle-income families, but Macho, our case-study school, is mainly a school for the less-privileged. As many as 60 pupils are orphans who have lost both parents, probably as a consequence of HIV/AIDS.

The core Maasai heartlands of Kajiado, well away from Nairobi, are very different. In these expansive areas, extending down to the Tanzania border, there are still substantial numbers of out-of-school children, so a stronger response to FPE might have been expected. At Pembe, the oldest school in Kajiado with boarding facilities to cater for children from nomadic households, the increase was just 28%.

## **Kisii District**

At three of the four public schools visited in Kisii District, the response to FPE was roughly comparable with the national trend: Grade 1 enrolment increases ranged from 48% at Ndovu down to 25% at Sungura.

Nyati School, however, was an outlier, recording an intake decrease of -12%. The reasons for this exceptional trend are not entirely clear. Nyati is located in Kisii town, near to the market and to a low-income housing area. The Grade 1 intake of 158 in 2002, the baseline year, was considerably higher than it had typically been previously: in 1999 and 2000, recruitment had been around 115. Judged against this longer-term baseline, the Nyati intake did, in fact, increase modestly in 2003.

The above-average intake increase at Ndovu is of particular interest. Ndovu is one of the oldest schools in the district, originally scheduled during the colonial period as a school for Asian pupils only. As late as the 1980s, Ndovu continued to be predominantly an Asian school. Today, however, African pupils make up the overwhelming majority.

Shortly before independence, when segregation was abandoned, Ndovu became a medium-cost school, charging higher fees than the regular, ex-African, schools; but lower than those charged by the high-cost, ex-European schools, such as Kisasa in Nairobi. During the 1990s there was an admission charge of Kshs 1,500 (approximately \$US 23) together with various additional levies, the combined effect of which was to position Ndovu as a school for Kisii town's middle class, out of reach for most pupils from poorer families. The school had little difficulty finding parents prepared to pay these fees because of its reputation as a top performer in the KCPE examination.

With the inception of FPE in 2003, Ndovu's managers – in contrast to those at Kisasa in Nairobi – made no attempt to maintain these cost barriers. From 2003 onwards no charges of any kind were levied; and even the requirement that pupils wear a uniform was abandoned. In consequence the intake to Grade 1 jumped by nearly 50% in that year – the third-highest proportionate increase among the 14 public schools we visited, behind only Tangazo and Majani in Nairobi. Ndovu now recruits from a broader socioeconomic spectrum than it did previously – although it still remains predominantly a school for middle-income families. Total enrolment has increased steadily, from just over 700 pupils in 2002 to more than 900 in 2007.

## **Nyeri District.**

As can be seen from Table 1, FPE 2003 had virtually no impact at any of the four public schools we visited in Nyeri district. There were single-digit Grade 1 enrolment increases at Mugunda and Baraza, the two rural schools we had selected, but empty classroom blocks at both schools gave testimony that the long-term enrolment trend was downwards. At the two urban schools, Kazi and Nafasi, FPE produced no discernable impact.

Concerned that somewhere in the district there might be schools we did not know about where the response to FPE 2003 had been stronger, we consulted informed local opinion. However the professional staff we spoke to at the district office and elsewhere were unanimous in telling us that such high-impact schools did not exist.

Two main reasons can be identified. First, Nyeri district has a long history of enthusiasm for education dating back at least to the 1930s, when, partly out of frustration at the slow pace of development but also as a challenge to the government-supported mission system, local leaders participated in the setting up of an independent schools movement, outside of government control and entirely on a self-help basis. By the late 1940s networks of independent schools had been established throughout most of the districts making up Central Province. It has been estimated that by this time, as many as one-third of the entrants to the only public secondary school in Nyeri district were graduates of independent primary schools (Anderson, 1972). Strong community sanctions ensured that even among the most marginal families, many children received at least some education. Remaining pockets of under-enrolment were largely eliminated by FPE1 in 1973 and FPE2 in 1979, so that by the time of the third initiative in 2003, few children had yet to be reached.

Second, in recent years there has been an increasing trend for young people to move away from Nyeri district once they complete their education, in search of better employment opportunities elsewhere – mainly in Nairobi but also in other rapidly-growing urban centres such as Thika and Mombasa. Older people, many of them past child-bearing age, have often been left to care for the family land. In consequence, demand for places in the rural schools is in decline. There are already empty classrooms at both Mugunda and Baraza, as we have noted; and the educational managers we consulted told us that the situation is much the same at many, if not most, rural schools.

However neither of these reasons can explain the complete lack of FPE response at Kazi, an urban school situated amongst low-income housing in a market town some distance from the district headquarters. Kazi has consistently been one of the top-scoring Nyeri public schools in the KCPE examination: in 2006, it ranked in sixth place among 373 schools. Its mean score, at 329.5, was higher than that at any of the other public schools we visited – including even Kisasa, the ex-high cost school in Nairobi, where the mean was 308.7.

In consequence, Kazi is highly popular among parents, and attracts numerous applications from would-be entrants. Until 2002 recruitment was regulated through the imposition of substantial fees: at Ksh 9,000 (\$US 143)<sup>6</sup> per family per year; more than double the amount charged at any of the other Nyeri public schools we visited. With the implementation of FPE in 2003, however, this economic barrier disappeared: like all other public schools, Kazi lost the right to levy formal fees.

Nevertheless another barrier to recruitment has remained in place, which in the event has proved highly effective. Like many of the other public schools we visited, Kazi has an associated pre-school unit. But whereas at these other schools attendance at the pre-school unit is optional, at Kazi it is a virtual pre-requisite for admission to Grade 1. The output from the pre-school programme averages around 150 per year, almost exactly matching the intake to Grade 1.

Pre-primary education at Kazi is an extended, and formal, process. There are three separate levels – a babies' class, a nursery class and a pre-primary class. The learning of English is heavily stressed, although Kiswahili, the national language, is also taught. Tests at the end of each year govern access to the next level; and a pass at the end of the pre-primary year is needed for entry to Grade 1.

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<sup>6</sup> A conversion rate of Kshs 63 per \$US 1 (the approximate rate during 2007) is used throughout this paper. During early 2010, the rate has been around Kshs 75.

It is clear that functionally the pre-primary unit at Kazi is to all intents and purposes a downward extension of the primary school. Organizationally, however, it is quite distinct. Falling outside the aegis of the Ministry of Education, it is not bound by the requirement of FPE 2003 to offer free instruction. In 2007 parents paid Kshs 1,000 per month (approximately \$US 16) for each pre-school child: a higher fee than they paid for primary schooling before FPE 2003.

The restrictions to recruitment at the Grade 1 entry point are maintained throughout the fee-free primary sequence through a closed-door policy. Kazi receives numerous applications from parents anxious to transfer children from other, less-successful schools, but most are refused. As the principal explained:

Parents often try to bring their children here from other schools, but our policy is to accept them only if the father has come to the town on transfer. If a child is having problems (at the current school) we advise the parents to work with the teachers to try to solve them. Many of these schools have empty classrooms, but still pupils want to come here. If you poach a pupil from another school you are denying that school funds because of the capitation grant.

Despite the restrictions, several pupils in our Grade 5 and 8 samples had transferred to Kazi since FPE 2003. Some wrote of the experience in their autobiographies:

In 2001 I was in a different school. I wanted to join Kazi but the head teacher refused . . . In 2004 my parents really tried their best, and . . . that time he agreed. (Boy, 15 years).

It seems evident that without unusually persistent parents, this pupil would not have been accepted at Kazi!

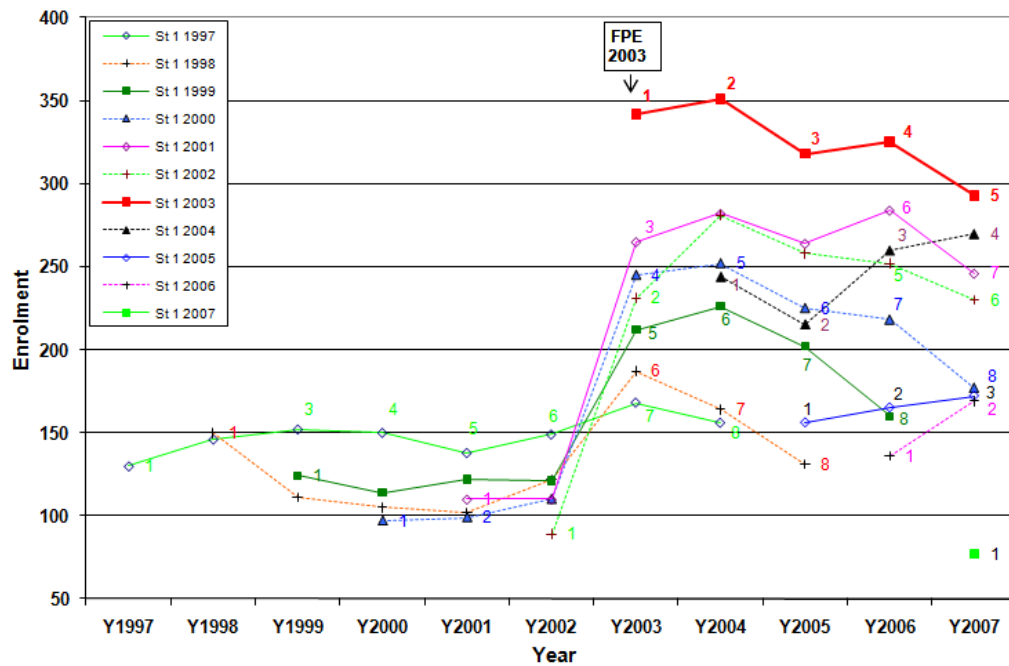
Given these double barriers to entry, it is hardly surprising that despite the school's location near the centre of a workaday market town, Kazi draws its recruits predominantly from relatively prosperous, middle-income families. On a range of socioeconomic indicators (guardian's occupation, guardian's education, family size, employment of labourers to work agricultural land) the pupils in the Grade 8 Kazi sample come from more privileged backgrounds than those at any of the other public schools we visited – with the single exception of Kisasa, the ex-high cost school in Nairobi.

### **3.2 FPE 2003: Its quality effects**

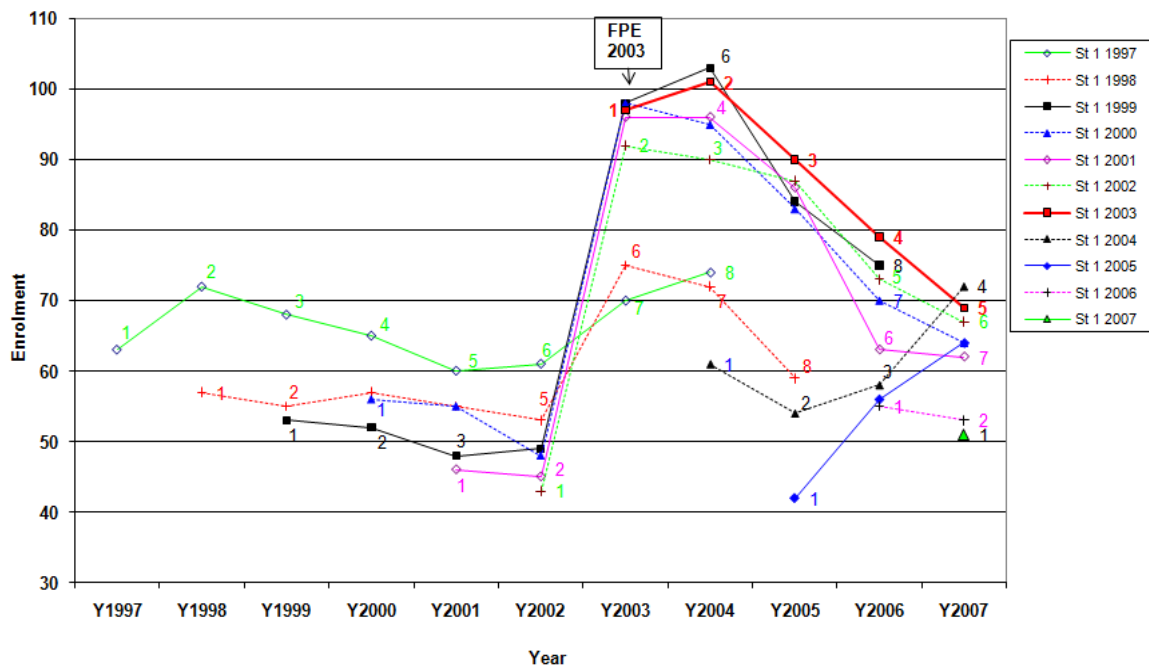
It is instructive to examine the cohort survival curves for Tangazo and Majani: the two public schools among the 14 we visited where the effect of FPE 2003 on Grade 1 intakes was greatest. The curves for these high-impact schools are shown as Figures 1 and 2, and both cover the period 1997 to 2007. Both schools, it will be recalled, recruit their pupils predominantly from among the children of the poor: slum dwellers in the case of Tangazo; slum dwellers together with the sons and daughters of domestic servants at Majani.

The discontinuities in the cohort curves between 2002 and 2003, the first FPE year, are dramatic. It is clear that the impact on enrolments was not confined to the Grade 1 class: at both schools the effects were felt at all levels, although with diminishing force in the higher

**Fig 1 Tangazo School Nairobi: Cohort Survival Curves**  
Intakes 1997 to 2007



**Fig 2 Majani School Nairobi: Cohort Survival Curves**  
Intakes 1997 to 2007



grades. At Tangazo the total school roll almost doubled, from 943 in 2002 to 1,766 in 2003; while at Majani the increase was of the order of 75%.

This massive surge placed intense pressure on resources. Both schools, as it happened, had unutilized classrooms, but no additional teachers were posted to either. In consequence, class sizes burgeoned – in some cases reaching three-digit numbers. Desks, textbooks and other essential materials were all in critically short supply.

Not unnaturally these deteriorating conditions created concern among the parents of children already enrolled at Tangazo and Majani – especially among the opinion leaders. Many of those who could afford to do so took action. A Majani ex-parent told us that a few months after FPE implementation he removed his two children and transferred them to a private school.<sup>7</sup> He resigned his position as treasurer of the Parent-Teacher Association, and since then has had no contact with Majani.

Survivors from the FPE intake had reached Grade 5 at the time of our first visits in 2007. Evidence of the continued effect of these resource constraints was plain. At Tangazo, about 70 pupils were crowded into each of the four Grade 5 classrooms, which had clearly been designed for a much smaller number. Flimsy tables, each shared by several pupils, took up most of the available floor area, confining the teacher to a narrow space directly in front of the chalkboard, and making access to the back of the classroom almost impossible. Many table tops were in a dilapidated condition so that usable writing surfaces were at a premium. However textbooks were in reasonable supply, thanks to a donor-supported project which started three years after FPE, in 2006: typically, one book was shared between two to three pupils.

Since 2003 there has been a marked ‘FPE wave’ passing through both schools. The patterns are especially clear at Tangazo. In 2004, the wave was strongest in the junior grades: total enrolments in Grades 1 to 3 were more than 60% higher than those in Grades 6 to 8. But by 2007, when the wave had reached the middle grades, the balance had tipped: enrolments in Grades 4, 5 and 6 were nearly double those in Grades 1, 2 and 3. These distorted, rapidly-changing enrolment patterns have created substantial management problems.

The trends in post-FPE recruitment to Grade 1 to be seen in Figures 1 and 2 convey an important message. As the graphs show, intakes at both schools plummeted after their FPE peak in 2003. At Tangazo, the intake fell from 340 in 2003 to 75 in 2007: a decline not far short of 80%. Despite the fact that fees were no longer being charged, Tangazo recruited considerably *fewer* Grade 1 pupils in 2007 than it had in any of the pre-FPE years between 1997 and 2002. The trends at Majani were similar, if less dramatic.

Almost certainly, the reputation for overcrowding and poor-quality teaching which Tangazo and Majani acquired in 2003 has been mainly responsible for their subsequent difficulties in attracting new recruits to Grade 1. Ironically, however, this negative reputation has led, at Tangazo at least, to a paradoxical reversal. Far from being overcrowded and under-resourced, the Grade 1 classes when we visited them in 2007 presented pupils with an environment far more conducive to effective learning than that available in many more-popular schools.

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<sup>7</sup> The fees are met by his employer; a local resident for whom he works as a night watchman.

The 75 Grade 1 pupils were grouped into three classes of roughly equal size, each with its own teacher. Clearly, the teachers were taking full advantage of the opportunities falling numbers had presented to them. Each child had his or her own desk; and broad aisles between the desks made it easy for teachers to move around the room and supervise written work. A substantial space clear of desks was available for drama, music and other group activities. A library cupboard in one corner, accessible to the pupils, held a generous and well-used supply of readers, in both English and Kiswahili. Children's work was displayed around the walls. The contrast with conditions in the Grade 5 classrooms, already described, could not have been more striking.

Grade 1 teaching had finished for the day at the time of our visit, but in one classroom a number of pupils had stayed on after the teacher had left. Quite unsupervised, they were busily engaged in self-generated learning activities; some reading, others drawing or working number problems on the chalk board.

We spoke with the class teacher later in the staff room. It transpired that she was responsible for coordinating the work of the three Grade 1 teachers. She was clearly concerned about what would happen to her pupils once they left the sheltered environment of the reception year and moved into the higher grades:

I will miss my class when they move to Grade 2 in a few weeks. If these slum children had a proper chance all the way through school, many of them could become scientists or doctors.

The 'FPE wave' in the high-impact schools is of course a temporary phenomenon. By the year 2011 the pupils who entered Grade 1 in 2003 will have completed the eight-year primary course and left. If more teachers of similar calibre and commitment to the teacher just quoted were available to schools such as Tangazo and Majani, there seems no reason why, given time, the 'quality shock' resulting from FPE 2003 could not be reversed.



## 4. The transition to secondary school: open access; unequal opportunities

### 4.1 Public secondary education in Kenya: its hierarchical structure

During the early years of Kenya's independence, a place at a secondary school was a privilege restricted to a favoured few. In 1971, for example, only about 14% of the pupils sitting the primary school leaving examination (known at the time as the Certificate of Primary Education examination, or CPE) performed well enough to gain a place at a Government-maintained secondary school the following year (Somerset, 1974). Unaided secondary schools (mainly self-help *Harambee* schools) absorbed a similar proportion, but the education they provided was generally of much inferior quality. Dropout rates were heavy, so the chances of successfully completing the four-year secondary course were minimal.<sup>8</sup> For the remaining CPE candidates – more than two-thirds of the total – primary education was terminal: they could not enter a secondary school of any kind.

Recently, however, the performance barriers to secondary education have been substantially lowered, so that today (in 2010) relatively few primary leavers who wish to continue their education are denied a place in a public secondary school on the grounds of their academic achievement.

But this does not mean that all recruits start their secondary education on an equal footing: far from it. Kenya's public secondary schools are arranged in a tripartite hierarchy, with a tiny minority of prestigious *national* schools at the top of the pyramid, a larger minority of *provincial* schools in the middle tier, and a substantial majority of *district* schools forming the base of the pyramid.

The formal distinction among the three types of secondary school is based on their catchment areas: as their names imply, national schools recruit their students nationally, while provincial and district schools recruit from the province or district within which the school is located.

The national schools include most of the longest-established public secondary schools in the country. The oldest national school, Alliance Boys' High School, was set up in 1926 by a group ('alliance') of three Protestant missionary societies, to provide continued education for the trickle of African pupils emerging from the primary schools who were deemed at the time capable of benefiting from it. Currently there are just 18 national schools, including five which, under the pre-independence colonial regime, were high-cost schools reserved exclusively for pupils of European origin. Most national schools are 'robust' institutions; buttressed by well-established traditions and supported by influential old pupils. Intakes are selected from all over the country, on a district quota basis. Competition for access is intense: only about one primary leaver in 100 wins a place in a national secondary school.

Provincial schools are generally of more recent establishment. A few date back to the mid-1940s, but many more were set up in the early post-independence years when, in response to critical shortages of middle-level manpower, the expansion of secondary education received high priority. Unlike the national schools, they limit their intakes to applicants from primary schools located in the same province. Thus in Kisii District primary leavers can apply for

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<sup>8</sup> Most pupils who entered unaided secondary schools saw themselves as having 'failed' the CPE examination.

provincial secondary places in Nyanza Province; likewise Kajaiido leavers, in Rift Valley Province; and Nyeri leavers, in Central Province.

Provincial schools outnumber the national schools by a wide margin, and are much easier of access. In Central Province, for example, there were 111 provincial schools in 2007, providing places for about 20% of primary leavers.

District schools, at the base of the public secondary-school pyramid, serve essentially local catchments. Some have boarding facilities, but most offer day schooling to pupils living within walking distance. Many district schools were originally established by local communities as self-help *Harambee* schools, but from the 1970s onwards were gradually absorbed into the public system as government began meeting salary and other recurrent costs. They are by far the commonest type of secondary school; in Central Province, they number nearly 600, and make up about 70% of all secondary schools, public and private.<sup>9</sup>

The selection process for entry to secondary school reflects, and powerfully reinforces, this tripartite status hierarchy. When final-year primary pupils register for the KCPE examination, they also apply for a secondary school place. They are entitled to make seven choices: two for national schools, two for provincial schools, and three for district schools. Once the results are available, three selection rounds follow in sequence: the national schools first, then the provincial schools, and finally the district schools.<sup>10</sup>

Fee structures further reinforce the hierarchy. With the inception of the Free Secondary Education (FSE) programme at the beginning of 2008, tuition charges were waived at all public secondary schools,<sup>11</sup> but the much higher charges for boarding were retained. In consequence the district schools, most of which do not provide boarding facilities, became relatively more affordable. In a careful analysis, Ohba (2009) found that in a group of more than 20 district day schools, total charges in 2007, before FSE, averaged Kshs 11,628 (\$US 185); whereas in 2008, the first FSE year, they amounted to only Kshs 4,938 (\$US 79) – a reduction of 58 percent. By contrast, the total costs of attending a national or provincial school remain substantial. Sawamura and Sifuna (2008) have estimated these to be Kshs 50,000 to 60,000 (\$US 750 to 950) per annum for a national school; Kshs 35,000 to 50,000 (\$US 550 to 750) for a provincial school.

Although data are not available, it seems probable that among the pupils who perform well enough in the KCPE examination to qualify for recruitment to a national or provincial school, there are significant numbers from less-privileged families who are forced to accept entry to a district school, because the fees are so much lower. The likely consequences for their future prospects will become evident from the analysis which follows below.

In striking contrast to their increasingly-dominant presence at the primary level, private schools play a comparatively minor role as secondary education providers. There are a few elite private secondary schools, run mainly by religious denominations, but the majority are

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<sup>9</sup> However because district schools tend to be relatively small, they are less dominant in terms of enrolments. In Central Province, pupils from district schools made up 61% of all KCSE candidates, public and private, in 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Except in Nairobi City, where places at public secondary schools are in short supply, entry to the district schools is essentially non-selective.

<sup>11</sup> To compensate for the lost revenue, the FSE programme provided for public secondary schools of all types to receive an annual capitation grant of Kshs 10,265 (\$US 164) per student. However in 2008, the first FSE year, payment of the first tranche of this grant was delayed until the beginning of the second school term. There have been similar delays in subsequent years.

low-status, proprietor-owned institutions, generally located in areas where places in government secondary schools are in short supply.

A systematic analysis of the relationships between the secondary school hierarchy just outlined and access to post-secondary opportunities is not currently available, but a limited study of a set of results from the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) – the examination which terminates the four-year secondary cycle – gives a clear indication of some of the main trends.

**Table 2: Mean KCSE Score by Type of School. Central Province, 2007**

	Schools	Candidates	Mean KCSE score	Grade equivalent (approx)
Public schools:				
National	7	1,164	9.99	B+
Provincial	111	13,712	6.66	C to C+
District	587	31,578	4.07	D+
Private schools	112	4,831	4.46	D+ to C-

Note: Only national schools located in Central Province are included.

Source: Republic of Kenya Ministry of Education. Central Province Quality Assurance and Standards

Department: KSCE Examination Results Analysis, 2007:20.

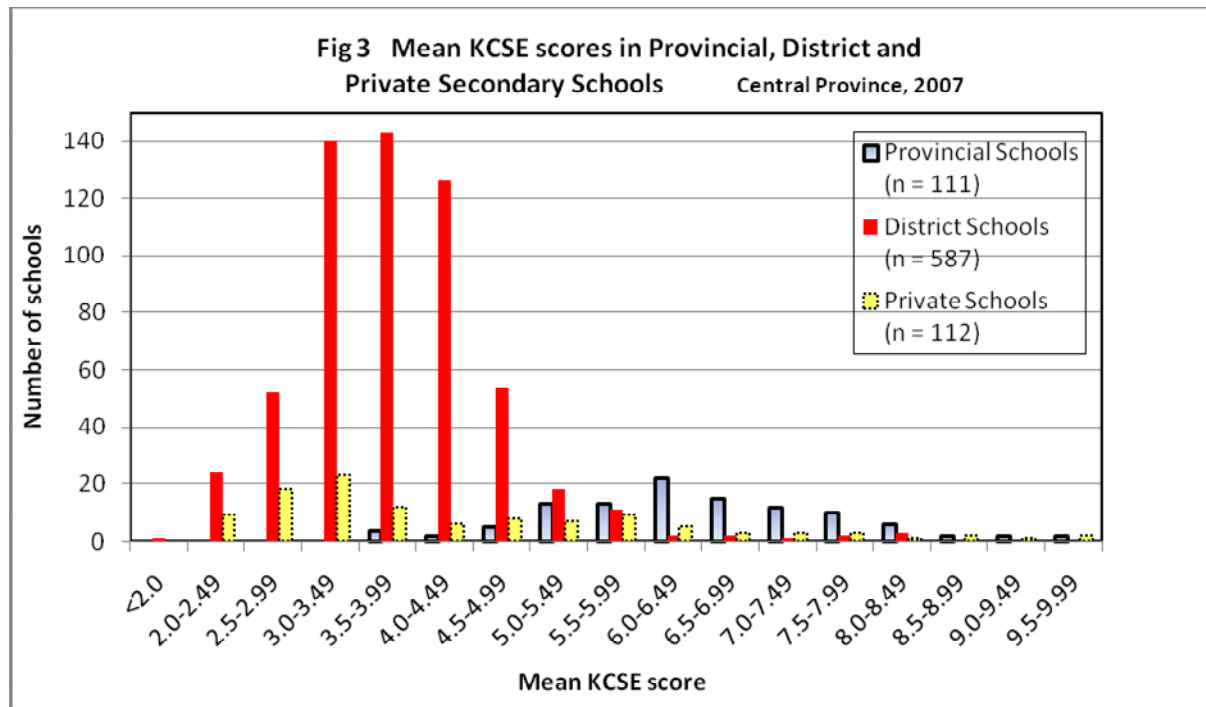
Table 2 compares the overall performance of national, provincial, district and private secondary schools in Central Province in the 2007 KCSE examination. The mean scores are calculated by converting KCSE letter grades into a twelve-point numeric scale: Grade A converts to 12 points; Grade A- to 11 points; B+ to 10 points; and so on down to Grade E, which converts to 1 point.

Huge performance differences are evident. The mean score for students attending national schools located in Central Province was as high as 9.99, equivalent to a letter grade of just below B+. For the provincial schools the mean was 6.66 (between Grade C and C+), while for the district schools it was only 4.06 (Grade D+). Students at the private schools also performed poorly, but, with a mean of 4.46 (between Grade D+ and C-), were a little more successful than those at the district schools.

The contrasts are even more apparent in Figure 3, which disaggregates the data to the school level and compares the distributions of KCSE means<sup>12</sup>. The degree of separation between the distributions for the provincial schools and the district schools is particularly striking. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of the 111 provincial schools achieved a mean score of 6.0 or better; but in sharp contrast, only eight of the 587 district schools (1.3%) achieved a comparable score. Similarly, as many as five in six of the district schools (84%) failed to reach the modest performance level of 4.5, compared with only about one in 15 of the provincial schools (7%).

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<sup>12</sup> National schools are excluded, because they are so few in number.



Source: Republic of Kenya Ministry of Education. Central Province Quality Assurance and Standards Department: KSCE Examination Results Analysis, 2007:13-18.

Reflecting the fact that they are of two essentially different types, the means for the private schools scatter widely, with a lengthy skew towards the higher scores. A few elite private schools, all run by religious denominations, perform at par with the top provincial schools; but the great majority, all proprietor-owned, are concentrated near the bottom end of the scale, along with most of the district schools.

Across the range of Central Province secondary schools of all types – national, provincial, district and private – the variation in performance is massive. Three national schools were most successful, with 2007 mean scores of 11.22, 10.91 and 10.64 - close to the theoretical maximum of 12 points; while three district schools were least successful, all with scores of 2.00 - close to the theoretical minimum of 1 point.

Clearly, such wide variations among schools have major implications for the prospects of the students enrolled in them. A range of opportunities is open to secondary school graduates, including various pre-service training courses (e.g. for primary teachers, medical assistants, hotel workers), but for the great majority, the chance of continued education at a public university is, without doubt, the most desirable.

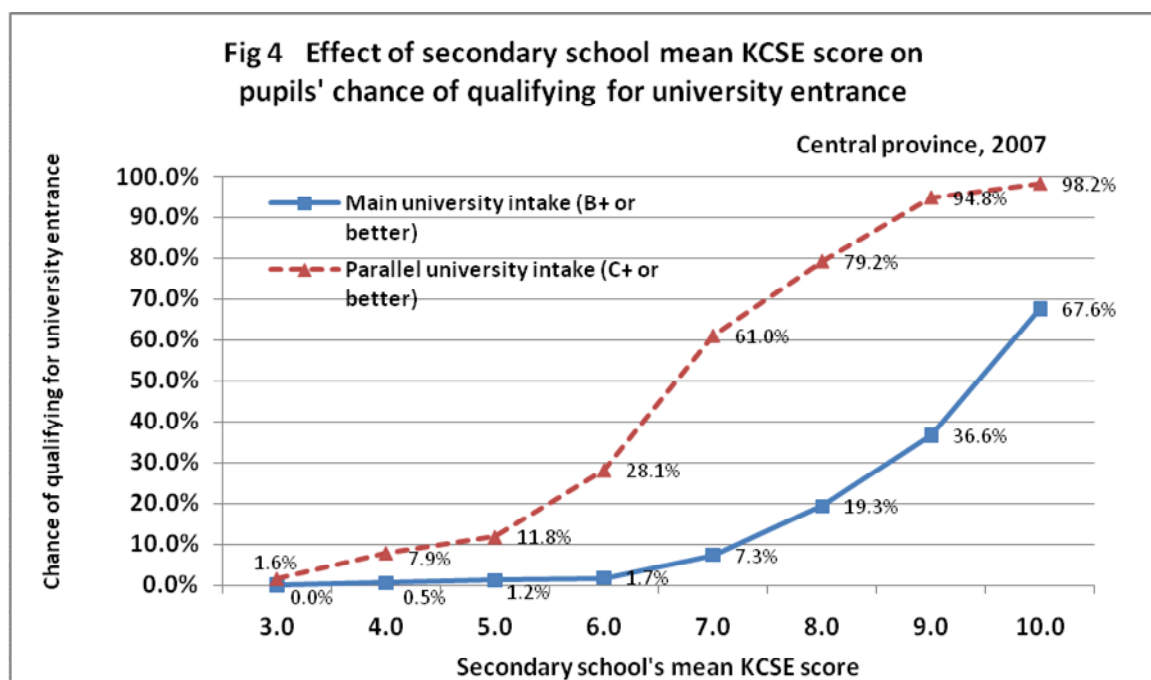
Two alternative university programmes are available: the regular, low-fee programme, and the parallel, high-fee programme. In 2007, the performance requirement for entry to the regular programme was a minimum KCSE grade of B+ (10 points); but for the parallel programme, the minimum was only C+ (7 points)<sup>13</sup>. So for applicants from low-income families unable to meet the higher costs of the parallel programme, the barriers to university entrance are considerably more formidable than they are for those from more privileged backgrounds.

<sup>13</sup> The cut-off points vary a little from year to year: for 2008, the minimum grade required for the regular programme was lowered to B (9 points)

Figure 4 plots the chances of a secondary school leaver qualifying for university entrance through either the main intake, or the parallel intake, according to the mean KCSE score of the school he or she has attended. The graphs are based on the pupil-level KCSE results for Central Province secondary schools of all types in the 2007 examination<sup>14</sup>. The two variables are of course necessarily related; but even in a low-performing school, some exceptional students may nevertheless out-achieve their classmates, and qualify for a university place<sup>15</sup>.

The difference in shape between the two curves is noteworthy. At the most successful secondary schools, with KCSE means of around 10 points, about two thirds of the leavers qualify for the main university intake and virtually all for the parallel intake. In Central Province, only the national schools, and two of the top provincial schools, reached this high performance level in 2007.

However as we move down towards the middle levels of the performance scale, the curves diverge. With each one-point fall in the KCSE mean, the proportion of main-intake qualifiers drops sharply, whereas the proportion qualifying for the parallel intake remains relatively high. Among schools with mean KCSE scores of around 7.0 - a little above the overall provincial-school mean - only about 7% of candidates can expect to qualify for the main intake, but around 60% are likely to qualify for the parallel intake.



Towards the bottom of the scale the curves converge, but even here there are considerable differences. A pupil from a school with a mean KCSE score of 4.0 – close to the average for all district schools – has little chance of qualifying for the main university intake: the odds are about one in 200. But for the parallel intake, the odds are better: about one in 12.

It is clear from these patterns that for primary leavers with aspirations to continue their education to the university level, the transition to secondary school is crucial. For the small

<sup>14</sup> The data-points were calculated by totalling the number of students reaching the two university admissions criteria for the five schools closest to the KCSE mean scores plotted along the X axis (10.0; 9.0 etc)

<sup>15</sup> The chances of individual students in a particular school qualifying for university entrance depend on the scatter of scores and the degree to which they are skewed, as well as on the central tendency.

minority who score well enough in the KCPE examination to win a place at a national school or top provincial school, the prospects of qualifying for the main university intake are good; whereas for the majority who enter a district school, the prospects are vanishingly small.

However for those district-school students fortunate enough to come from families with the resources to pay the higher fees, the parallel university intake offers a second – and much better – chance. Provided the financial barrier can be surmounted, the performance barrier to a university education is less daunting.

#### **4.2 Who goes to which secondary school? Access patterns among the Grade 8 leavers.**

Table 3, over the following two pages, gives a summary overview of the destinations of the 2007 Grade 8 leavers from our 17 case-study schools. It is evident the barriers which in the past restricted access to secondary school have now largely disappeared. The lowest transition rate was at Macho in Kajiado, but even here more than half the 2007 graduates entered a secondary school in 2008. At Mugunda and Baraza, the two rural schools in Nyeri, and Tangazo, the Nairobi school serving a major slum settlement, the rates were around 60- 65%; while at the remaining 10 public schools they ranged upwards from about 80%, reaching 100% at Kisasa, the ex-high cost school in Nairobi. Universal transition was also recorded at the three private schools.

These high and relatively even transition rates are certainly impressive. They are consistent with the changes which have taken place nation-wide in recent years. Between 1985-1986 and 2003-2004 the national transition rate remained static, only once falling outside the narrow range 42% to 46%<sup>16</sup>. However in 2004-2005 a sudden surge in secondary school admissions brought about a sharp rise to 52.1% - up 6.3 percentage points over the previous year (Otieno and Colclough, 2009). Subsequent rises have brought the rate to 60% in 2006-2007 (Ohba, 2009).

But when the rates in our case-study schools are disaggregated to take account of the type of secondary school the pupils enter, substantial differences appear. As Table 3 shows, the graduates from certain primary schools move predominantly towards the provincial secondary schools; whereas from other primary schools, the flows are mainly towards the less-prestigious district schools. The direction of flow correlates closely with the school's average performance in the KCPE examination.

##### **Public schools.**

We first focus on the transition patterns among the leavers from the 14 public primary schools (Table 3a to 3d). The pyramidal structure of opportunities in the public secondary schools, already discussed, is clearly evident. At the apex of the pyramid a tiny minority of leavers – just four among the 447 in our Grade 8 sample - succeeded in winning a national-school place. The provincial schools were more accessible: they recruited 103 leavers, or 23% of our sample. Then, at the base of the public-school pyramid, 190 leavers (43%) entered district schools. Recruits to private secondary schools numbered 92 (21%), while 20 (4%) entered secondary schools of unknown type.

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<sup>16</sup> It is likely that the combined effects of the introduction of the eight-year primary cycle in 1985, and of cost-sharing between 1988 and 2002, largely account for this persistent plateau.

Within these overall trends, there are marked differences among districts and schools. In Kisii District, there is a sharp contrast between Ndovu and Nyati, the two urban schools, where nearly two thirds of the leavers were accepted into national or provincial secondary schools; and Sungura and Simba, the two rural schools, where fewer than one in five were as fortunate. These differences reflect KCPE mean scores; Ndovu (307.1) and Nyati (286.3) out-performing Sungura (248.7) and Simba (219.57) by a wide margin<sup>17</sup>.

**Table 3: Destinations of the 2007 leavers from the case-study schools**

**a. Kisii District**

a. Kisii District

Destination of primary leavers (2008)	Urban schools				Rural schools				Four Kisii public schools	
	Ndovu		Nyati		Simba		Sungura			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Entered secondary school:										
National	2	6%	-		-		-		2	2%
Provincial	20	60%	16	52%	4	13%	4	13%	44	35%
District	9	27%	11	35%	22	73%	22	71%	64	51%
Private	-		-		-		-		-	
Type not known	-		-		-		-		-	
Total entering sec. school	31	93%	27	87%	26	87%	26	84%	110	88%
Repeated Grade 8	2	6%	3	10%	2	7%	2	6%	9	7%
Entered training programme	-		-		-		3	9%	3	2%
No longer in educ. or training	-		1	3%	2	7%	-		3	2%
Total pupils traced	33		31		30		31		125	
Pupils not traced	-		--		-		-		-	
Total sample	33		31		30		31		125	
School mean KCPE score	307.12		286.26		219.57		248.65		265.40	

**b. Nyeri District**

Destination of primary leavers (2008)	Urban schools				Rural schools				Four Nyeri public schools	
	Kazi		Nafasi		Mugunda		Baraza			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Entered secondary school:										
National	1	3%	-		-		-		1	1%
Provincial	15	45%	14	45%	3	6%	2	8%	34	25%
District	14	42%	14	45%	28	58%	15	58%	71	51%
Private	-		2	6%	-		-		2	1%
Type not known	1	3%	--		-		-		1	1%
Total entering sec. school	31	94%	30	97%	31	65%	17	65%	109	79%
Repeated Grade 8	2	6%	1	3%	2	4%	7	27%	12	9%
Entered training programme	-		-		3	6%	-		3	2%
No longer in educ. or training	-		-		12	25%	2	8%	14	10%
Total pupils traced	33		31		48		26		138	
Pupils not traced	-		-		-		-		-	
Total sample	33		31		48		26		138	
School mean KCPE score	329.48		285.56		234.89		171.90		255.46	

(Table 3 continued on p. 22)

<sup>17</sup> The national mean KCPE score is standardised at 250 points.

**Table 3, continued**

**c. Kajiado District**

C. Kajiado District

Destination of primary leavers (2008)	Urban school		Rural schools				Three Kajiado public schools	
	Macho		Pembe		Mukia			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Entered secondary school:								
National	-		1	3%			1	1%
Provincial	-		4	11%	7	21%	11	12%
District	3	13%	15	42%	14	42%	32	34%
Private	7	29%	5	14%	5	15%	17	18%
Type not known	3	13%	6	17%			9	10%
Total entering sec. school	13	54%	31	86%	26	79%	70	75%
Repeated Grade 8	5	21%	1	3%	3	9%	9	10%
Entered training programme	-		-		-		-	
No longer in educ. or training	6	25%	4	11%	4	12%	14	15%
Total pupils traced	24		36		33		93	
Pupils not traced	2		1		-		3	
Total sample	26		37		33		96	
School mean KCPE score	217.54		261.51		267.73		248.93	

**d. Nairobi City**

d. Nairobi City

Destination of primary leavers (2008)	Ex low-cost schools				Ex high-cost school		Three Nairobi public schools	
	Tangazo		Majani		Kisasa			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Entered secondary school:								
National	-		-		-		-	
Provincial	1	5%	5	11%	8	33%	14	15%
District	6	27%	9	20%	8	33%	23	25%
Private	8	36%	18	40%	6	25%	32	35%
Type not known	-		8	18%	2	8%	10	11%
Total entering sec. school	15	68%	40	89%	24	100%	79	87%
Repeated Grade 8	2	9%	1	2%	-		3	3%
Entered training programme	2	9%	-		-		2	2%
No longer in educ. or training	3	14%	4	9%	-		7	8%
Total pupils traced	22		45		24		91	
Pupils not traced	3		6		7		16	
Total sample	25		51		31		107	
School mean KCPE score	228.90		250.88		308.72		262.83	

**e. Private schools (all proprietor-owned)**

Destination of primary leavers (2008)	Kajiado		Nyeri		Nairobi environs		Three private schools	
	Tumbo		Broadlands		Highrise			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Entered secondary school:								
National	1	3%	4	6%	9	17%	14	9%
Provincial	18	51%	53	84%	43	83%	118	76%
District	12	34%	9	10%	-		19	12%
Private	3	9%	-		-		3	2%
Type not known	1	3%	-		-		1	1%
Total entering sec. school	35	100%	66	100%	52	100%	155	100%
Repeated Grade 8	-		-		-		-	
Entered training programme	-		-		-		-	
No longer in educ. or training	-		-		-		-	
Total pupils traced	35		66		52		155	
Pupils not traced	-		11		-		9	
Total sample	35		77		52		164	
School mean KCPE score	338.48		360.10		394.70		364.43	



In Nyeri District the trends were similar, although relatively fewer pupils entered national and provincial schools. At Kazi and Nafasi, the two urban primary schools, leavers had slightly better-than-even chances of a national or provincial school place; but at Mugunda and Baraza, the two rural primary schools, their chances were barely one in ten. Again, the differences reflect KCPE performance; Kazi (329.5) and Nafasi (285.6) being much more successful than Mugunda (234.9) and Baraza (171.9).

Transition patterns at Pembe and Mukia, the two rural schools in Kajiado District, were similar to those at comparable schools in Kisii and Nyeri; with recruits to the national and provincial secondary schools in the minority, heavily outnumbered by entrants to the district secondary schools. But at Macho, the only urban school, the patterns were quite different. The largest group, numbering seven students, entered private secondary schools; while not a single Macho leaver entered a national or provincial school. Unlike its urban counterparts in Kisii and Nyeri Districts, Macho is a weak KCPE performer; its mean score (217.5) being much lower than those at Pembe (261.5) and Mukia (267.7). As we have already noted, Macho is located in a rapidly-expanding township just outside the boundaries of Nairobi. A number of private primary schools cater for middle-income families; but Macho is predominantly a school for the underprivileged.

In Nairobi, the outcomes were again different, the most prominent feature being the high proportion of leavers from all three case-study schools entering private secondary schools, and the relatively low proportion entering provincial schools. Even at Kisasa, the ex-high-cost school, there were only eight provincial-school entrants (33%); while six entered private secondary schools (25%). Principals and education managers who we consulted were unanimous as to the reason: expansion of public secondary school places in Nairobi City has not kept pace with the growth in output from the primary schools, forcing many primary leavers to seek places at private secondary schools – most of them of low quality.

### **Private primary schools.**

Table 3e sets out the transition patterns at the three private primary schools from which we could get follow-up data. These are elite, proprietor-owned schools, charging high fees and providing in return high-quality education to pupils from middle-income and upper-income families. All three run buses, to transport pupils to and from the school each day; and two also offer boarding facilities. Hence they recruit their intakes from much wider geographic catchment areas than most public schools – but from much narrower socioeconomic catchments<sup>18</sup>. Like many other private schools, they achieve outstanding results in the KCPE examination. Highrise school, near Nairobi, featured among the top 10 schools in the KCPE merit-order list for Central Province in 2007 (mean score, 394.7); while Broadlands (360.1) was within the top 50. Even Tumbo, a new private school in Kisii which offered its first KCPE candidates in 2007, averaged 338.5 – nine points higher than Kazi, the most successful public school in our case-study group.

Two closely-related trends in the transition data shown in Table 3e are clearly apparent. First, the flow from these private-sector primary schools is not towards similar schools at the secondary level; rather, it is overwhelmingly towards secondary schools in the *public* sector. Only three pupils among the 155 graduates entered private secondary schools. One further

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<sup>18</sup> Pembe, the Kajiado school catering largely for children from nomadic families, is the only public school among the 14 we visited which provides boarding facilities.

pupil entered a secondary school of unknown type, but all the remaining 151 (97% of the total) found places in public schools.

Furthermore, within the public sector the flow is overwhelmingly towards the *high-status* secondary schools. Only 19 private-school leavers – twelve of them from the newly-established Tumbo – entered district secondary schools. As many as 118 (76%) were recruited by provincial schools; while fourteen (9%) won the most-valued prize: a place at one of the highly-prestigious national schools. At Highrise School, not a single pupil among the 52 leavers failed to win either a national or a provincial secondary school place.

The contrast between the overall public-school and private-school transition patterns is striking. Table 4 sets out the data.

**Table 4: Overall public-school and private-school transition patterns  
(Summarised from Table 3)**

Destination of primary leavers	Leavers from 14 public schools		Leavers from 3 private schools	
	n	%	n	%
<b>Entered secondary school:</b>				
National	4	1%	14	9%
Provincial	103	23%	118	76%
District	190	43%	19	12%
Private	51	11%	3	2%
Type not known	20	4%	1	1%
<b>Did not enter secondary school</b>	79	18%	-	-
Total pupils (traced)	447		155	

We must of course be cautious in interpreting these patterns, given that our sample of schools is so small, and furthermore, was not randomly selected. It is certainly true, as we have noted, that the three private schools we visited all achieve outstanding KCPE results; but in this they are not atypical of private schools in general. The KCPE performance gap between public and private schools is wide, and in recent years has been growing wider. In the 2006 examination, private schools took 45 of the top 50 positions in both Nyeri District and Nairobi City. One year later, they took 46 of the top positions in Nyeri, and all 50 in Nairobi<sup>19</sup>. With larger, more representative samples, the details shown in Table 4 would of course have been different; but the main contours would almost certainly have been quite similar.

The salient point to be noted from Table 4 is the degree to which private-school leavers are tending to pre-empt places in the more-prestigious public secondary schools. In our limited sample, leavers from the three private schools were nearly ten times as likely to enter national secondary schools as leavers from the 14 public schools; and more than three times as likely to enter provincial schools.

Conversely, leavers from the public primary schools were well over three times as likely to enter district secondary schools; and five times as likely to enter private secondary schools. As we have already noted, private secondary schools in Kenya are quite unlike private primary schools. With some notable exceptions, they are low-status institutions; providing second-chance opportunities for those who, for whatever reason, did not enter a public secondary school.

<sup>19</sup> In 2007, the top Nairobi public school ranked in 58<sup>th</sup> position.

Despite the heavy over-representation of private-school leavers among the recruits to the national and provincial secondary schools, there is no evidence that the selection system granted them any special dispensation. The reason so many of them won places at these prestigious schools was simply their superior KCPE performance. Indeed in our Nyeri sample, leavers from Broadlands, the private school, generally required rather higher scores for places in the high-status secondary schools than leavers from the four public schools. For example the lowest KCPE score among the four national-school recruits from Broadlands was 418; whereas the single national-school recruit from the public schools scored only 398. Similarly only four of the ten Broadlands leavers with KCPE scores between 300 and 339 won places in provincial secondary schools, compared with ten of the 15 Nyeri public-school leavers with comparable scores<sup>20</sup>.

So if we accept – and this is, of course, a major proviso – that ‘merit’ should be defined purely in terms of KCPE scores, without reference to any contextual factors, then we must conclude that the selection system is ‘merit-based’. However there is a strong case to be made that the conditions in which public-school and private-school pupils receive their education are so different that separate secondary-selection yardsticks should be applied. We return to this most important issue in the following section.

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<sup>20</sup> These results are, of course, much too fragmentary to be conclusive. Systematic data from a larger, more representative sample are needed.

## 5. Summary, and implications for policy

This concluding section recapitulates the paper's main findings and considers their implications for policy. As in the preceding section, we focus the discussion around two main themes: first, the impact of FPE 2003 on access and quality; and second, access issues in the transition to secondary school

### 5.1 FPE 2003: Its impact on access, and on educational quality

Perhaps the most important point to emerge from the first phase of the survey was the uneven impact of FPE 2003 on enrolments. In one of the 14 public case-study schools, the Grade 1 intake more than tripled in the FPE year; while in two others, the intake actually fell. For purposes of analysis, it is convenient to divide the schools into three groups: a **high-impact** group, made up of two schools; a **medium-impact** group, of five schools; and a **zero-impact** group of seven schools. The demarcation between the high and medium-impact groups is clear-cut; that between the medium and zero-impact groups, less so.

At the two **high-impact** schools, both of which are in Nairobi, the response to FPE 2003 was of a different order to that at all the other twelve schools. We have already noted the statistics: at Tangazo the Grade 1 intake rose about 250% and the total enrolment nearly doubled; while at Majani the intake rose about 125%, and the total enrolment by nearly 75%.

Tangazo and Majani share in common one key feature: both are schools for the children of economically-disadvantaged urban families. Clearly, the substantial fees charged during the cost-sharing period which preceded FPE 2003 had been a major burden to these families. Tangazo is essentially a slum school; it is located on the periphery of one of the largest informal settlements in sub-Saharan Africa, and draws more than 90% of its pupils from that settlement.

The situation at Majani is more complex. The school is located near the centre of one of Nairobi's most affluent suburbs, but nevertheless, like Tangazo, draws its pupils almost entirely from low-income families. Despite the half-century which has elapsed since the school was first established during the racially-segregated colonial period, Majani has never succeeded in escaping from the stigma originally attached to it as a school for the disadvantaged. Some of its recruits are, like their earliest predecessors, the children of domestic servants working for elite families living in the area; others walk or commute from the nearest slum settlement.

The **medium-impact** group consists of five schools, all of them in Kisii District (three schools) or Kajiado (two schools). Grade 1 intake increases ranged from 48% (at Ndovu school, in Kisii) down to 25% (at Sungura, also in Kisii). In terms of their educational provision, Kisii and Kajiado are both relatively underdeveloped districts, certainly in comparison with Nyeri. Kisii District, 300 km to the west of Nairobi, has much higher agricultural potential; but its isolation from the main population centres has restricted access to major markets, and hence the growth of cash incomes. It seems that in Kisii, small pockets of under-enrolment remained, which responded positively to the abolition of fees by FPE 2003.

Kajiado, to the south of Nairobi, is mainly a semi-arid pastoral area, although new settlements, largely made up of commuters, are springing up along its boundary with Nairobi. Low enrolment rates in Kajiado and similar semi-arid pastoral districts have long been a matter of concern. The relatively muted response to FPE 2003 suggests that it may be cultural factors, rather than financial costs, that are mainly responsible for keeping young people, particularly girls, away from school.

Finally the **zero-impact** group is made up of seven schools, including all four in Nyeri District, one in Nairobi, and one each in Kajiado and Kisii. Grade 1 intake changes ranged from +15% at Mugunda, in rural Nyeri, down to negative figures of -6% at Kisasa in Nairobi, and -12% at Nyati in urban Kisii.

The main reason for the low response to FPE 2003 in Nyeri is clearly that there was little unmet demand. The district has a long history of passionate commitment to education, dating back at least to the 1930s when, as a direct challenge to the hegemony of the mission schools, networks of independent schools were established, covering most of Nyeri and adjacent districts. These and later initiatives, including in particular the vigorous self-help movement of the 1960s and 1970s, almost certainly eliminated any remaining pockets of under-enrolment well before FPE 2003.

However the lack of FPE response at Kazi, one of the Nyeri schools, together with Kisasa in Nairobi, requires explanation. Both these schools have built up local reputations for strong KCPE performance; and were, in fact, more successful in the 2007 examination than any of the other public schools in our case-study group. On the face of it, then, we might have expected that once they lost the right to charge fees, both schools would have attracted substantial demand for places, not only from new entrants, but also from pupils in other schools wishing to transfer into the higher grades. In fact, however, the Grade 1 intake to Kazi rose only marginally, while at Kisasa, the intake actually declined a little. Changes in total enrolment were similarly minimal.

So despite their desirability, Kazi and Kisasa were almost entirely shielded from the enrolment impact of FPE 2003. The reason, as we have already seen in Section 3.1, is that both schools had in place other barriers to recruitment, which in the event proved just as effective as the old formal fees in limiting numbers. At Kisasa, as at most of the ex-high cost schools in Nairobi, levies for additional facilities, not available at regular schools, were maintained. There are no such facilities at Kazi, but instead there is a well-established pre-school unit. Enrolment in this unit for a minimum of two years is a virtual pre-requisite for admission to Grade 1. But pre-primary education is not regarded as part of the basic schooling cycle covered by FPE 2003, and furthermore, falls outside the administrative control of the Ministry of Education. Income must be generated to pay the teachers, so substantial fees are charged.

Although for the present we lack concrete data, it is likely that other **high-barrier** schools, similar to either Kisasa or Kazi, exist elsewhere in considerable numbers, especially in Nairobi and the larger towns. Further enquiry is needed.

The consequences of FPE 2003 for educational quality were clearly apparent during our 2007 visits to Tangazo and Majani - the two high-impact schools, both in Nairobi. Survivors from the 2003 intake had reached Grade 5 by 2007. At both schools, Tangazo in particular, conditions for learning in these classes were far from propitious. Groups of up to 70 pupils

were squeezed into rooms which had clearly been designed for much smaller numbers; desks were overcrowded and often in dilapidated condition. We learned at Majani that a number of parents had withdrawn their children during 2003 and transferred them elsewhere – usually to private schools.

The effects of these poor learning conditions were clearly apparent in the recruitment statistics in subsequent years. At both schools, intakes to Grade 1 declined steeply between 2003 and 2007, by nearly 80% in the case of Tangazo. In fact, Tangazo recruited fewer Grade 1 pupils in 2007 than it had in any of the six years leading up to 2003. FPE had clearly inflicted considerable damage on their reputations among local parents.

An analysis of Nairobi enrolment statistics over the period of FPE implementation indicates that there were numerous other schools where the impact was comparable to that at Tangazo and Majani. At about 20 of the 193 Nairobi public schools, Grade 1 intakes rose more than three-fold between 2002 and 2003, comparable to the increase at Tangazo. At a further 30 schools, intakes more than doubled - comparable to the increase at Majani<sup>21</sup>.

In the years since FPE it is probable, of course, that many of these high-impact schools will have lost pupils – as did Majani and Tangazo. Nevertheless a rapid review could yield invaluable information as to the resources they may currently need to bring learning conditions up to an acceptable level. Before the review, a preliminary mapping exercise locating the schools would be most useful.

There is a further, more general issue. In any education system where resources are constrained, there is an inevitable tension between broadening access on the one hand and enhancing quality on the other. After both FPE1 in 1974 and FPE2 in 1979, massive dropout rapidly eroded the impressive initial gains, in part because quality was so heavily affected. Similarly, as we have seen, intakes to both Tangazo and Majani, our two high-impact schools, quickly returned to pre-FPE3 levels – again largely because of the negative quality effects. Clearly, any initiative to broaden access which does not incorporate complementary measures to maintain quality is likely to be self-defeating.

## **5.2 Moving to secondary school: open access, unequal opportunities.**

Follow-up data from the second phase of our survey demonstrated in striking fashion the extent to which the performance barriers limiting access to secondary school have been dismantled in recent years. At all the 14 public primary schools in our case-study group, more than half the 2007 leavers enrolled at a secondary school in 2008; while at ten of these schools, the proportion was four-fifths or higher.

Further analysis, however, showed that depending on the school's KCPE performance, the direction of flow varies a great deal. From the most successful primary schools, leavers move predominantly towards the prestigious provincial secondary schools, while from other, lower-scoring schools, the flow is almost entirely towards the lower-status district schools.

Moreover, leavers from the private primary schools compete, in the same arena, with the public-school leavers. They sit the same KCPE examination, and are judged against the same

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<sup>21</sup> There are likely to be numbers of similar high-impact schools elsewhere in Kenya; especially, perhaps, in other major urban areas with extensive informal housing settlements, such as Mombasa and Kisumu.

performance criteria, for places in the same secondary schools. Only a handful of the leavers from our three case-study private primary schools entered private secondary schools; the vast majority took places in public secondary schools. And because their KCPE performance was, on average, much superior to that of the public-school leavers, they took substantial numbers of the places in the high-status secondary schools. Private-school leavers were about three times as likely as public-school leavers to be accepted into a provincial school, and ten times as likely to win a place at a national school – at the top of the secondary-school status hierarchy.

It cannot be stressed too often that our case-study schools are far from representative of primary schools in general; and hence that any conclusions we draw from our analysis must be cautious and tentative. Nevertheless there is unequivocal evidence, in Nairobi City and Nyeri District at least, of a wide and growing performance gap between the private and public schools. In the 2007 KCPE examination, as we have seen, private schools took 47 of the top 50 places in Nyeri district, and all 50 top places, without exception, in Nairobi City.

If a broadly-comparable range of post-secondary opportunities was open to graduates from each of the three tiers of the secondary-school system, then these differences in secondary-school access would be of less concern. But as we saw in our analysis of Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination data from Central Province, the pathway a leaver follows in moving from primary to secondary school has massive consequences for his or her subsequent life chances. In the 2007 examination, a candidate from a secondary school with a mean score of 10 KCSE points – typical of the national schools – had a better-than-even chance of qualifying for the regular (low-fee) public university intake. By contrast a leaver from a school with a mean score of 4.0 points - close to the average for all Central Province district schools - had a chance no better than one in 200.

Clearly, then, there is risk that if current trends in secondary school recruitment continue, students who received their primary education at private schools will come increasingly to dominate access, not only to the high-status public secondary schools, but also to mainstream public university education.

A quota system regulating the allocation of places in the national and provincial schools could make a contribution towards resolving this issue. Such a system might take many forms. One alternative would be to set a maximum limit to the proportion of private-school leavers to be admitted to each national and provincial school during each annual selection round.

Another, perhaps preferable, alternative would be to set a minimum limit to the proportion of leavers from each public primary school admitted to the higher-status secondary schools. In our 14 case-study public schools, proportions ranged from 66 percent at Ndovu and 52 percent at Nyati, down to six percent at Mugunda, five percent at Tangazo, and none at all at Macho. A fixed minimum proportion of places (perhaps around fifteen percent, divided equally between boys and girls) would help improve opportunities for able pupils from less-privileged homes who, through circumstances over which they and their families have no control, have no alternative but to attend a primary school where the quality of instruction is poor.

But the fundamental issue, clearly, is that of quality; and no quota system will help resolve it. Home background factors doubtless contribute to the superior examination performance of pupils from the private primary schools, but the quality of the education they receive is almost

certainly much more important. If the KCPE performance gap between the private and public schools continues to widen, the incentives for parents who can afford it to choose private primary education for their children will intensify.

Since independence, measures to broaden access have with good reason taken priority in the development agenda for Kenya's public primary schools. Now, however, the point has been reached where, if these schools are to retain their vitality, it is crucial that the quality issue be addressed.



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## Report summary:

Based on case-study data from a small group of Kenya primary schools, this paper first examines local-level variations in the impact of the 2003 Free Primary Education programme. The effects varied widely: in two 'high-impact' schools, intakes more than doubled; while in several others, effects were negligible, either because local demand was already fully met, or in two cases because the schools had erected barriers to increased enrolment (the 'high-barrier' schools). A second section enquires into secondary-school transition patterns among the graduates from the case-study schools. Although overall transition rates were high, there were wide variations in the type of secondary school entered; and these in turn had massive consequences for the leavers' chances of ultimately qualifying for access to university. The policy implications of these findings are discussed in a final section.

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